

# Aphrodite's City in Turkey

**Simon Price**

'The glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome.' This saying still sums up much that we take to be important about the ancient world. The Parthenon and Pericles on one side, the Pantheon and Augustus on the other. Interest is focussed on fifth century Athens and on Rome in the late Republic and early Empire. But there are other parts of the ancient world, other periods, and other perspectives. Let us see what sort of puncture we get by taking a different city, Aphrodisias in Caria, as a starting point.

Where is Aphrodisias? Some maps of the Greek world include only mainland Greece and we tend to envisage ancient Greece as being roughly the same area as the modern country. To the East lies Italy, to the West Turkey. This is very misleading. How can one understand the Ionian Revolt or the Sicilian expedition unless one takes seriously the ties of kinship between the Athenians and the Ionians in Asia Minor and Sicily? But even if you look at a map which does show both mainland Greece and Ionia in the classical period you will not find Aphrodisias. The city is marked only on maps of the Roman empire. This is because the city was not created until the Hellenistic period, probably in the late second century B.C, by the combining of two adjoining settlements. Despite the fact that Rome was by this time the dominant power in this area, and may have encouraged the formation of the new city, Aphrodisias was very firmly Greek. Caria had still been semi-barbarous in the classical period, but, like so many areas round the Eastern Mediterranean, gradually took over the dominant culture of Hellenism. The formation of Aphrodisias is thus an example of the continuing spread of the Greek city in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. By the imperial period there were said to be five hundred cities in Western Turkey.

## **Inscriptions and Statues**

Aphrodisias would be little more than a name transmitted by Byzantine lexicographers were it not for the investigations of the site itself. The spot has long been known, but excavations conducted over the last twenty years by Professor Erism, with the financial support of the National Geographic Society, have produced staggering results. Aphrodisias is now one of the most impressive and interesting cities of the Greek world. The buildings which these excavations have revealed are impressive enough, as we shall see, but we would not be able to understand the city without the aid of inscriptions. To the great good fortune of modern historians the Greeks had a passion for writing carefully on tombstones, statue bases and buildings, and for publishing the texts of civic decrees and other official documents incised in marble. Almost a thousand such texts survive from Aphrodisias, making it one of the best documented Greek cities of the Roman period.

These inscriptions make it possible to understand the social and political life of Aphrodisias. They reveal a society sharply divided between the mass of the citizen population and a rich

land-owning elite on whose generosity the city was dependent for its well-being. Members of the elite, both male and female, made lavish gifts to the city. They founded festivals, they provided corn and oil, they went on embassies (a dangerous and expensive task). They were also primarily responsible for the civic buildings in which Aphrodisias gloried. For example, in the reign of Augustus one family promised to fund the building of two porticos which formed part of the imperial sanctuary or Sebasteon. Not that promises were always carried out speedily. One of the porticos had to be completed by the son of one of the original 'donors'. The city and the elite were locked together in mutual dependence. The city relied on the wealthy for its public resources, while the elite needed to justify extreme inequalities of wealth by expenditure on public service.

This reciprocal relationship between the city and the elite is illustrated by the statues depicting members of the elite, which were so abundant in Aphrodisias. Whereas the agora of classical Athens contained portraits only of the tyrant-slayers, there are about fifty extant marble portraits of citizens of Aphrodisias, which go right up to the end of the fifth century A.D. Take for example the statue of Lucius Antonius Claudius Dometeinus Diogenes, which dates to the early third century A.D. He wears an elaborate diadem topped with a bust of Aphrodite and ten busts of members of the imperial family which proudly proclaims that he had held the top local priesthoods of Aphrodite and the emperors. The inscription on the statue base records his other local offices and states that the statue was an honour granted him by his native city. Claudius Dometeinus did not simply vaunt himself. His services to the city ensured its gratitude. In turn the statue itself was erected not out of public funds but by a friend or relative of Dometeinus. A new cycle of dependence and gratitude was under way.

### **Sheffield Town Hall?**

The excavations which have increased the numbers of inscriptions and uncovered sculptures have also revealed some of the chief civic buildings. There is the temple of Aphrodite, a huge stadium, a theatre, agorai, an odeum, porticos and baths. Like many cities of this period the centre of Aphrodisias will have gleamed with marble. Once we have recovered from our astonishment at the lavishness of the buildings, what can we learn from them about the city? Perhaps it would help to list the major buildings that an archaeologist would uncover in the centre of, say, Sheffield. There would be the Cathedral, the theatre, the Town Hall with its recent extension, the Cutlers' Hall, banks and shops. There is some overlap between the lists of major buildings in the two cities, but the buildings of Sheffield are obviously the product of a society with a large bureaucracy resting upon an extensive and prestigious industrial and commercial base. Aphrodisias did keep public records, and there was of course local trade, aided by bankers, but these operations did not produce prominent public buildings. The civic buildings of Aphrodisias served the varied collective needs of all the citizens. They enabled the citizens to worship the gods, to attend competitions and performances at festivals, to hold public meetings and to keep clean.

Inscriptions and archaeology combine if we turn from the internal workings of Aphrodisias to the world in which the city was set. Aphrodisias was one of thousands of communities that

made up the Roman empire. The elites of these communities formed the backbone of the empire. It is entirely typical that Lucius Antonius Claudius Dometeinus Diogenes held the Roman citizenship, was a priest of the emperors and was the father and grandfather of Roman senators. Inscriptions which cover a wall of the theatre have just been published and give a fascinating picture of the relationship between Aphrodisias and Rome. These documents, which run from the late Hellenistic period right up to the third century A.D., show how the city attempted to maintain an honourable position for itself in the face of Roman power. From the start it was careful not to take 'action in opposition to the Romans', and later it appealed to Roman sentiment in order to win and preserve privileges. From the first century B.C. Aphrodisias made play of the fact that her patron deity was the mother of Aeneas and the city was granted by Octavian freedom, immunity from taxation and a treaty with Rome. These privileges, which were confirmed by successive emperors at the request of the city, ensured that the city stood outside the Roman provincial system; the Roman governor could not even enter the city except at the express request of the city.

### **Britannia Conquered**

Despite this freedom, or perhaps to make it less precarious, Aphrodisias built a sanctuary of the Roman emperors, as we have already noted. The last three seasons of work have uncovered part of its amazing remains. Two porticos sixty metres long and fourteen metres apart formed a monumental avenue. To what? The area at the end has not yet been excavated but it is likely that a colossal imperial temple awaits discovery. But the porticos alone are interesting. The northern one was adorned with representations of Roman conquests. both Republican and Augustan. The latter ones included successes over the Dacians, Rhaeti, Bessi and Trumpeleini! The southern portico, of slightly later date, displayed sculptural panels on three tiers. There are mythological scenes of deities, such as Dionysus, Apollo or the birth of Eros to Aphrodite. Then there are panels which feature various members of the Julio-Claudian family along with allegorical representations. Claudius is shown conquering a pleading figure of Britannia while Nero is seen seizing Armenia. There is also a relief of the recumbent figure of Earth stretching out her arm towards a standing figure of Roma. Imperial victories and imperial power encompassed the whole world.

Aphrodisias was a lively community. Its inhabitants had strong feelings of local patriotism even under the Roman empire (so much for the old view that individuals were lost in a world which they could not comprehend or control). The city was clearly very different from classical Athens both physically and in the way that the elite related to the city. but it is also recognizably a Greek *polis*. As such it attempted, with some success, to come to terms with the power of Rome without losing its dignity or its traditions. After all the Roman emperors were descended from their goddess. Is there a parallel between the position of Aphrodisias and that of modern Britain?

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